

MaryBeth Monaco-Vavrik  
**Michael (Corinne Michelle) West**  
Abstract Expressionism



*Still Life (City Art) (1957)*



*West, 1930*

## Biography<sup>1</sup>

- Born 1908 in Chicago, died 1991
- Took classes with Hans Hoffman when she moved to New York (1931)
- Professionally changed her name to Michael West in 1941 in attempt to minimize sexism's impact on her artwork
- Professionally and romantically involved with fellow painter Arshile Gorky
- Noted poet, essayist, and journal writer regarding modernism
- Suffered a stroke in 1976

## Influences<sup>2</sup>

- Began as a Cubist
- Hans Hoffman at Art Students League: focus on "the 'inner eye' and emphasis on capturing the essence of things"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marter, Joan M. *Women of Abstract Expressionism*. Yale University Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gotthardt, Alexxa. "11 Female Abstract Expressionists Who Are Not Helen Frankenthaler." *Artsy*, June 29, 2016. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-11-female-abstract-expressionists-who-are-not-helen-frankenthaler>.

<sup>3</sup> Hollis Taggart. "Space Poetry." Accessed February 20, 2020.

<https://www.hollistaggart.com/exhibitions/68-space-poetry-the-action-paintings-of-michael-west/>.

- Post-WWII shock and anger led to more abstractionist and expressionist paintings
- Context of the depoliticization of art
- Jackson Pollock's free-form style
- Zen Buddhist calligraphy with paintings derived from examples of Japanese Zen masters<sup>4</sup>

## Abstractionist Methods

- Paintings characterized by harsh pigments and thick, aggressive strokes
- Egian Girl (1942)
- Sand for texture and thickly raised canvases
- "Drawing out the internal spirituality of external physical elements"
- Became more free-form and less rigid
- Personal philosophy: "the new mysticism"
- Increased use of the entire body in painting (performing)



Egian Girl (1946)

## Critical Reception<sup>5</sup>

- *Arts Digest*, *Times Herald*, and *the Washington Post* praised her exhibits
  - Compared her to other great artists at the time
- Garnered brief attention
- Lack of scholarly critique and notoriety
- Drew less attention partially because of severe sexist attitudes, especially in the art world
- Critics defined her through association with her male colleagues
- 5 years after her death, the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center established an exhibit for her titled "*Michael West: Painter-Poet*"

<sup>4</sup> Vallarino Fine Art. "Michael West, American, (1908 - 1991)." Accessed February 20, 2020. <http://www.vallarinoart.com/michael-corinne-west>.

<sup>5</sup> Willette, Jeanne. "Michael West: The Artist Was a Woman | Art History Unstuffed." Accessed February 20, 2020. <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/michael-west-the-artist-was-a-woman/>.